Dave's Supermarket Still Going Strong at 70 Years

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Peter Steffen was born in 1830 in Eggiwill, Switzerland, about 21 miles southeast of Bern. He emigrated from Switzerland to the Vera Cruz, Indiana, area in 1850. Vera Cruz is about 42 miles south of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Peter Steffen was one of the pioneer farmers in Central Indiana.

In 1855, at the age of 25, Peter Steffen married Anna Barbara Strahm. Anna was also born in Switzerland, and she was 30 years of age when she married Peter Steffen. Peter and Anna Steffen had seven children in Vera Cruz, Indiana.

One of the children of Peter and Anna Steffen was Nathaniel Steffen (1868-1927). Nathaniel married Louisa Bahler (1858-1929). They had seven children and eventually moved to Elgin, Illinois.

Jonathan D. Steffen (1896-1984) was one of Nathaniel's seven children. Jonathan Steffen married Ida Wewetzer (1897-1980). Jonathan and Ida Steffen had eight children. Their oldest child was David William Steffen, and he was born in Elgin in 1920. The second oldest child of Jonathan and Ida Steffen was Melvin N. Steffen, born in 1921. All of the children of Jonathan and Ida Steffen grew up in Elgin, Illinois.

In 1926, Frank Duell built a new building in Fairbury. This structure became known as the Duell Building. It was designed to have walls dividing the building into five different business locations. The first tenant was the U.S. Post Office, located in the south slot in the building. Various businesses occupied the other four spaces over the years.

The first job Dave Steffen had was to sack potatoes at the Paradise Market grocery store in Elgin. Dave eventually became a buyer and stockman for that grocery store. Dave Steffen then served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was stationed in England during the war. Dave finished his service with the rank of Staff Sergeant.

After the war ended, Dave and his younger brother Melvin owned the Steffen Bros. grocery store in Deer Creek, Illinois. Through church friends, Dave Steffen met Miss Emma Lou Huber from Fairbury. In November of 1947, it was announced at the Christian Apostolic Church at Goodfield that both Dave Steffen and his brother Melvin Steffen were getting married. Dave Steffen married Emma Lou Huber from Fairbury, and Melvin Steffen married Miss Leona Wiegand of Forrest.

In the 1940s, Fairbury had nine different grocery stores or meat markets. Most of these were small neighborhood stores. The nine grocery stores were Frank's Market, Harper's Grocery, Hotaling's Grocery, Walton's Grocery, Kroger's Grocery, Werling's Meat Market, Rabe's Grocery, City Meat Market, and Little Joe's Grocery.

If a business consultant studied the grocery store business in Fairbury in the late 1940s, the consultant would have probably recommended not opening a new grocery store because there were too many competitors already established.

Undaunted by all the competing businesses, Dave and Emma Stephen decided to open a new grocery store in Fairbury in 1950. They chose the south end of the Duell building, which the Post Office had recently vacated. The Post Office moved to the building at the northeast corner of Locust and Second Streets.

Over the following years, Dave and Emma Steffen kept expanding their store until they eventually occupied the entire Duell building. The number of competing grocery stores dwindled steadily over time. Dave's Supermarket outlasted the other nine competitors and became the only grocery store in Fairbury.

Three of the significant threats to the long-term life of a business are physical damage to the facilities, the passing of the company from the founders to subsequent generations, and the failure to adapt to changing markets. In August of 1979, Dave's Supermarket had a "near-miss" experience with a major derailment of the TP&W train next to the Duell building. Eleven cars of a 94-car freight train derailed in downtown Fairbury next to Dave's Supermarket. Seven vehicles, a semi-trailer, a motorcycle, and a bicycle were damaged. Dave Steffen's car stopped a semi-trailer, which in turn stopped one of the derailed freight cars. The train car might have otherwise crashed into the crowded supermarket full of shoppers. Fortunately, no one was injured in the derailment. The Blade headline for this derailment was "The Miracle on Third Street." It was indeed a miracle because the derailment could have easily wiped out the entire grocery store and injured many shoppers.

The second major threat to a business is the transition that occurs when the founders pass along the company to the next generation. Many family-owned businesses fail because the business is not passed along successfully to subsequent generations. Fortunately, the Steffen family has handled the generational transfer of their business very successfully. Dave Steffen passed away in 2010 at the age of 90. Today, the company is managed using a team approach with the second and third generations of the family.

The third major threat to any business is the changing of technology and customer needs. Dave's Supermarket has identified and adapted to each technology change that has occurred over the years. They also have periodically remodeled their store, so it always has a modern appearance.

The most recent technology change is the customers' ability to order their groceries online and then pick them up. When store employees receive an online customer order, they quickly fill the order and have the groceries ready for customer pick-up.

One customer service feature that has not changed over the years is grocery delivery to the customer's vehicle by grocery delivery employees. Very few grocery stores still offer this service to their customers.

After 70 years in business, Dave's Supermarket continues to have a strong business and attracts customers from many miles away. Every day they continue to fulfill their motto of "Wowing the Customer" with their products and services.

Melvin Steffen, left side, and Dave Steffen, right side, with their Deer Creek delivery truck circa 1948.